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More voters trust governor than legislators to fix deficit

By Aurelio Rojas
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Nearly all voters believe California's looming \$14 billion deficit is a serious matter, but fewer than half think taxes will have to be raised to resolve the problem, according to a Field Poll released Thursday.

Voters have much more confidence in Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger – 60 percent approve of his overall performance – than in the Legislature to do what's right to fix the deficit, according to the poll.

The random survey of 1,283 registered voters was conducted Dec. 10-17 – a period during which the governor announced he will declare a "fiscal emergency" in January to focus on reducing the deficit.

Nearly six in 10 respondents said state and local taxes are too high, a margin that has not changed much since the Field Poll last surveyed voters on the issue in 2001 and 2002.

Approval of the Republican governor, who has resisted new taxes since he was elected in 2003, cuts across party lines. Even 55 percent of Democrats approve of his performance.

"Few political figures in the United States have such favorable ratings across party lines," Field Poll Director Mark DiCamillo said of the governor, who proudly projects an image of "post-partisanship."

The Democratic-controlled Legislature, meanwhile, is seen in a much less positive light. Only 39 percent of respondents approved of its performance. In fact, only 44 percent of Democrats rated the Legislature favorably.

"It's not surprising (voters) have more confidence in the governor than the Legislature – the Legislature is seen as more partisan," DiCamillo said.

The resurgence in voter approval for Schwarzenegger has continued since his re-election in 2006, when the governor moderated many of his views.

In three surveys taken this year, between 56 percent and 60 percent of voters approved of his job performance. The Legislature's approval ratings never reached 40 percent.

"Voters tend not to blame (Schwarzenegger) for the deficit because there hasn't been pain yet," DiCamillo said. "But in the coming year that may be different as it becomes clearer what services will be reduced."

Although more voters than not believe taxes will have to be raised, the narrow margin – 48 percent to 43 percent – pales in comparison to the 90 percent who believe the budget deficit is a serious matter.

DiCamillo said perceptions vary widely according to political ideology, with twice as many conservatives holding to the view that taxes will not have to be raised.

Liberals hold the opposite view while middle-of-the-road voters, by a 51-39 margin, foresee a tax increase, according to the poll.

"They're resigned to it, but still don't like it," DiCamillo said.

Homeowners – who account for the lion's share of voters – are nearly split on whether taxes will have to be raised. Renters are inclined to believe so, by a 53-36 margin.

One of the poll respondents who approves of Schwarzenegger's performance is Scott Clemmer. The 50-year-old Republican, who lives in Rocklin, gives the governor a "qualified thumbs up."

"No one agrees with everything a governor is doing because there's a lot of give and take in politics, but I generally agree with him," Clemmer, who works for an electronics manufacturer, said in a follow-up interview with The Bee.

Clemmer believes the Legislature is more responsible for the deficit than the governor and that taxes don't need to be raised.

"It's a two-party system and legislators too often vote for the good of their party (rather) than the general welfare," Clemmer said.

John Kingston, 70, a Democrat who lives in Elk Grove, doesn't think much of the job Schwarzenegger and the Legislature are doing.

"The deficit is out of control," said Kingston, a retired educator. "I don't see any leadership from either direction.

The solution is to raise taxes and cut services, Kingston said, but he doesn't hold out much hope the governor and the Legislature will take that course.

"They'll do what they've done in the past and cover over the deficit," Kingston predicted. "And it will show up bigger next year."